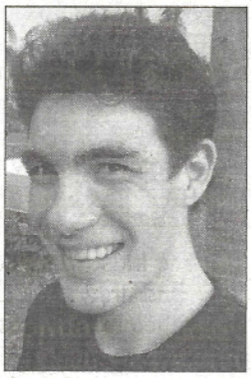
Pastor's Column

Joy: a Fire, a Dance, a Hurricane

I'd like to compare and contrast, if you will. What is joy to you? When do you know you're feeling it? Is it when your daughter brings home straight-A's on her report card? Is it that hot cup of coffee first thing in the morning? Maybe it's the way your spouse smiles at you, the feeling of guitar strings on your fingertips, the taste of an apple, the smell of leather as you put your Chevy into drive. When you read about how God so loved the world that he gave his son for you, does that put a stir in your stomach? Do you feel joy?



Luke Marshburn
Homestead Mennonite

For me, joy is pretty specific. When I say I "feel" joy, I mean it literally.

The first time I felt what I've come to call "joy" was as a child, reading the last book of C. S. Lewis' "The Chronicles of Narnia" series. I've been known to have an expansive imagination and tend to care as much about fictional people as I do about the people around me, so it didn't surprise me that I was in tears by the end of that last book. I won't spoil "The Last Battle" for those who haven't read it yet, but suffice to say, I felt that Lewis' work depicted the promise of Christianity: that of a closer relationship with God and an eternity to spend with him.

When I finished the book, the first thing I noticed was an odd sensation in my chest. It was something I'd never noticed before, some burn rising up in me. It wasn't at all like heartburn, though that would be the simplest thing to which I could compare it. Instead of making me cough and grimace, it made me smile. It made me feel so good that I dreaded falling asleep that night, for fear that whatever lava was building up would dissipate by morning.

Have you ever felt something like that, an emotion so strong that it manifests physically and reminds you that it's good to be alive? Maybe it's not a fire. Maybe it's like bubbles, or it's electricity in the brain or a twitch in the spine. Maybe it's some tick you feel when you're stocking shelves at work, when you're cooking dinner, when you're showering and remembering that there are things out there that make you grin. To me, that's joy. Have you felt that?

To my glee, the fire never went away. Sometimes, it makes me bounce around the room as it flares up and overflows into the world around me. Worship can be an exuberant experience as we sing in church or wander the woods or sit at the kitchen table, newspaper in hand. In these moments, when we think about how God was willing to die for us, or how much intricate detail he put into every green leaf, or how he loved us first and calls us to love him back, joy can express itself in more than a fire or a smile. Back when I worked at the Living Way Bible Bookstore, on a slow day I'd run through the store as fast as I could, laughing, burning with passion as I praised our creator for all that he is.

But not every day is a "burn with joy" kind of day. Bills come due, children get sick, people fight over borrowed lawn mowers or parking on the curb, dishwashers break, shoulders pull out of socket, appendixes burst, the living room gets clean but the junk just migrates to the bedroom. Maybe there's so much stuff going on that you just can't dance. I know that happens to me. It's at such times that I'm most thankful about the difference between joy and happiness. Happiness can be fleeting. I can't rightly say that I'm "happy" when my sister gets a cold or when my school studies keep me up until three in the morning. I can, however, say that I'm still joyful. If I concentrate, I can feel that fire inside, even while checking a fever or poking the bags under my eyes.

When I find the troubles of life overwhelming, I like to take a moment to reorient myself on the truth. I'll sit in the backyard, maybe, in the middle of the night, in the dew and wind, and simply listen. There, surrounded by the rumble of air conditioners and the shivering palm fronds, I can remember how Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39b [NIV].) Jesus was praying about how much he'd rather not face his crucifixion and death, yet he asked that God's will be done even through his hardships. He loves us that much. With that thought in mind, I try to pray the same prayer: "Lord, life's hard right now. If you please, I'd like these challenges to pass, but if not, let your will be done." And then I smile, knowing that God is with me through it all.

If dancing around would be the "highs" of joy, then these midnight chats would be the "flats" of it. There are no "lows" when it comes to joy. It can be raging in power and sweep you off your feet, or it can be a little flame lighting your way as you navigate the trials of life. That's why joy reminds me of hurricanes. I know, that's a controversial comparison for Floridians. But when you're in the highs of joy, it's like facing the feeder bands. The fierce winds go 74 miles per hour (and that's only a category one!), and your blood pumps at the same frantic pace while you lift your hands in worship. Then there are the flats, when you sit in the eye surrounded by storm walls, somehow captured in a still moment and praying that God's will be done. The highs and the flats, the easy days and the hard days, the feeder bands and the eyes. I embrace the hurricane. Do you?

Ugandan Orphans Choir perform, "We Will Go!"

The choir of 18 orphans from Uganda have been called into a life of purpose to trans-

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